For an insomniac, I am sleeping rather well these days. It certainly helps to live under a commander-in-chief who not only lands on an aircraft carrier in a fighter jet, but then delivers from that platform a clearheaded and stirring address on America's role as Earth's foremost guardian of individual liberty. Watching Operation Iraqi Freedom unfold almost flawlessly within just three weeks has made slumbering easier, knowing that bad guys also saw America assert itself decisively with relative ease.

But I also am resting especially well after a recent tour of military installations in CONUS — Pentagon-speak for the continental United States. It similarly should soothe Americans to know that we are defended by dedicated, well-equipped, tough men of action and brave women of honor.

While in the Pentagon's hands, my rank is DV, short for "Distinguished Visitor." Dozens more acronyms wash over me during my trip. (My tour's organizers operate under strict not-for-attribution rules. Thus, neither they nor anyone I meet can be identified by name.) My travels take me from Nellis Air Force Base (within sight of the Las Vegas strip), to San Diego's Marine Corps Recruitment Depot and the USMC's Camp Pendleton, the aircraft carrier John C. Stennis and Fort Lewis, the Army special-forces base in Tacoma, Washington. Seven days with all four U.S. armed forces deeply impress me as a taxpayer, citizen, and patriot.

Uncle Sam spent $331 billion on the Defense Department in fiscal year 2002. No doubt, some of that cash spit-shined the Pentagon's bureaucracy. Does the Air Force, for example, really need a Personnel Center at Randolph Air Base in Texas and a Personnel Operations Agency in Washington, D.C.?

But as frustrating as such duplication is, one also must marvel at the advanced technology that those tax dollars buy.

AMONG THE BRAVEST

As one F-16 after another screams down the tarmac and ascends with afterburners aglow into Nevada's turquoise skies, a brand-new F/A-22 stealth fighter gleams in the dry heat beside a sun-splashed hangar.

"The F/A 22's primary mission is to establish absolute control of the skies over any battlefield," according to the website of Boeing, the "air dominance" vehicle's co-developer, along with Lockheed-Martin. "It provides first-look, first-shot, first-kill capability."

The F/A 22's gently-curved fuselage, absorbent materials, and special coatings render it virtually invisible to radar. It can climb higher (ceiling: 50,000 feet), and fly more swiftly (Mach 2) than any other Air Force stealth fighter. This model's pilot proudly calls the cockpit "my office." Its vast array of buttons and interchangeable display screens gives him a vivid sense of "situational awareness" in both training and combat. Another pilot calls the F/A-22 "the King Kong of fighter aircraft."

In a nearby building, a Predator drone stands on display. These UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) have become famous for providing field commanders and intelligence operatives maneuverable eyes in the sky. Circling quietly above, the Predator can peer discreetly on a location or — as Qaed Sinan Harithi learned — fire up to two laser-guided Hellfire missiles at targets below. Harithi could vouch for the Hellfire's effectiveness, had it not blasted him and five of his al Qaeda comrades to bits in Yemen last November.

The Predator B promises to be even more robust. As early as next November, it will be able to stay aloft for up to 30 hours (versus 24 today). Sharper cameras will give base operators more detailed knowledge of enemy mischief. And, most amazingly, each Predator B can carry a small pod on its underside that can detach itself and fly through mysterious gas clouds. It can evaluate them instantly for the presence of chemical or biological
weapons. The mini-B — about the size of a skateboard — can land in a safe location where the air samples it has collected can be recovered for laboratory analysis.

The JDAM (Joint Direct Attack Munitions) kits at Nellis AFB are like brain implants for dumb bombs. A guidance system and fins attached to a regular gravity bomb use GPS satellite data to steer ordnance away from, say, foreign schoolyards and into hostile shipyards. Unit cost: $20,000.

The smallest JDAM is now a 500-pound device. The Pentagon is creating a 250-pound, small diameter bomb. Its increased accuracy and diminished blast capacity will make it even easier to strike — for example — a foreign despot's bedroom but spare the lives of his children and domestic servants down the hall. America's bombs are becoming both smarter and more polite.

For its part, the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier John C. Stennis is a giant, technological marvel. As one observer quipped, "This is 97,000 tons of diplomacy." The seven-year-old vessel's nuclear reactor permits it to travel 10 to 12 years without refueling. (The bad news: Each pit stop to replace its atomic core requires three years in port.)

I am fortunate to land on the Stennis's deck in a COD (Carrier-On-board Delivery aircraft). I am strapped inside a C-2 Greyhound that a giant steel cable decelerates from 150 MPH to a full stop within three seconds and 200 feet. Helmeted and — for safety's sake — seated backwards through all of this, the feeling is one of personal, physical implosion. Believing that all of me would shrink into something the size of a softball, I close my eyes very tightly until that sensation and the tail hook's seemingly relentless scrape stop. I quickly open my eyes and experience a full body rush as those around me applaud this real-life thrill ride.

Throughout a long, sunny day, the Stennis cruises 90 miles off the coast of Rosarito Beach, Baja California, Mexico. Its week-long mission is to help Naval aviators qualify for carrier takeoffs and landings in F/A-18 Hornets and Superhornets, EA-6B Prowlers and S-3 Vikings. One cannot tire of watching jets speed toward the deck, then stop abruptly after snagging tail hooks in any of four rubber-band-like cables stretched perpendicularly across their paths.

On "DV Row," the ship's honored guests sleep in surprisingly comfortable quarters that recall two-man college dorm rooms. In them, the on-board TV service features "PLAT Video," or what I nickname "The Stennis Channel." On-deck cameras show the jets in black and white as they approach and align their wings to the deck's pitch and yaw. (The tiny runway often bobs simultaneously from side-to-side, front to back and up and down!) It's nearly impossible to tear one's self from this genuine, no-gimmick, reality TV. After a few minutes, it becomes easy to predict which pilots will land smoothly and which will miss the cables, drag their tail hooks across the deck in a trail of sparks and throw their jets into full throttle to take-off and return for another landing attempt.

Choreographing all of this activity are flight controllers below decks, others peering down from above the bridge and literally dozens of sailors who maintain, guide, restrain, release and recover aircraft from take-off preparation to post-sortie storage.

Those who do this work wear color-coded uniforms that correspond to their duties. Among others, those in green perform mechanical upkeep. The "grapes" in purple conduct fueling. And those in red handle ordnance and crash-related emergencies.

Given the tremendous noise in what is essentially a hectic, compact, floating airport, these professionals communicate largely through sign language. Even more amazing, during night operations they do this in tremendous darkness. After dusk, the Stennis shuts off most of its deck lights, to make it less conspicuous to antagonists.
"Night Ops" on an aircraft carrier resemble a glow-in-the-dark ant farm. The hands on deck do their duties while barely visible to each other. Flashlights of different hues allow them to communicate amid the ruckus. And yet airplanes keep coming and going — at roughly one-minute intervals.

Directly above my cabin, jets rev their engines at full blast before getting launched off the deck by a steam-driven catapult. Down below, the sound has to be the loudest I ever have heard indoors. Thankfully, night ops end at about 12:30 A.M. Sleep comes quickly with the sea's slightest roll as a lullaby.

The next morning, in somewhat rougher waters, a sailor staggers as the ship forcefully lurches sideways. She smiles and asks: "Hey, who's steering this thing?"

Though not as exciting as an arrested landing, being shot off the Stennis is unforgettable as well. It's like a roller-coaster ride's first plunge, only in an enclosed space, louder and facing backwards. And no one screams.

SOLDERS, GENTLEMEN, WONKS…

The military's daunting technology and facilities aside, I am deeply moved as a citizen by the high quality of America's military personnel. With about three exceptions, the service men and women I meet are enthusiastic, energetic, and dedicated. From pilots to administrators to air-refueling specialists to those on kitchen patrol, they appear uniformly thrilled and honored to do their jobs. They are incredibly disciplined and courteous, something that would be welcome in the civilian world. At the risk of sounding like an elite egghead, I also find the vast majority of GIs more intellectual than I expected and far more so than they usually are depicted in the media and popular culture.

Among the more intriguing personalities I encounter:

One enlisted man at San Diego's Marine Corps Recruitment Depot perfectly fits the description "battle sculpted" that I hear another Marine state elsewhere. The letters "USMC" are tattooed across this young man's bartop-flat belly. On his commander's order, he calmly and confidently leaps off a diving board into the deep end of an Olympic-sized pool with his hands tied behind his back. Without apparent effort, he swims about 35 - 40 feet along the pool's edge. Breathing rather normally, he reaches a spot from which two of his colleagues retrieve him. "No sweat," his face says.

A junior surface warfare officer spent last December through March in the Persian Gulf. There he led a team of sailors who rappelled along the sides of steel containers on freight vessels seeking oil, industrial equipment, weapons and other contraband barred by the U.N.'s sanctions against Iraq. They never found anything verboten other than petroleum. "It would be all too easy to hide a dozen Stringer missiles in the back of a container box filled with tea," he says.

He now peruses computer, radar, and satellite data to assure that vessels unfriendly to the Stennis maintain their distance. From far inside the carrier, he also thinks deep thoughts about deployment of naval power around the world and how such force projection secures America and its interests.

One midlevel officer served as a Navy diver in Gulf War I. Near Kuwait, he repeatedly swam toward and attached explosive charges to Iraq's Soviet-made sea mines. They then were detonated to permit the safe passage of military and maritime vessels. He also used an underwater torch off the coast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to recover the propeller of the Monitor. On his first dive, his rubber umbilical air hose got stuck for five harrowing minutes beneath the anchor of the Civil War-era Union ironclad ship. He freed himself only to face more trouble on his next dive. During a change in the gas mixture while descending from shallow to 70-foot-deep water, his air supply inadvertently was cut off completely for about a minute. He thought about his wife and young family and took that situation as a signal to seek less fearsome work, such as in public affairs.
"My first assignment was to the Pentagon," he recalls, "where on September 11, the plane struck the building within 200 yards of my office. So much for reducing risk."

Among other responsibilities, he now escorts DVs around the Stennis and answers their incessant questions.

But most inspiring of all were the members of the First Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Fort Lewis, Washington. These Green Berets train in the shadow of Mount Rainier. Clear and snowcapped, it emerges from its usual gray shroud during my two-day stay.

I am ashamed to confess that when I first heard I would meet Green Berets, I anticipated a dull day surrounded by luggish, albeit well-trained GIs with fantastic aim. "Mongo shoot," as one of them later lampoons my unfortunate stereotype.

Wrong! The Green Berets are some of the most incredible men I have found anywhere. They are worldly, multilingual, fluent in regional issues and can operate as units or individually in unimaginably difficult circumstances. They also have active and facile minds. I regard the special forces I meet as very well-armed think-tank scholars. They also are perfect gentlemen who cheerfully regale visitors with intelligent discussion on a wide array of topics. And, if necessary, each can snap your neck with his pinkies, probably painlessly.

I speak at length with young, bright, and fit soldiers about international affairs, economics, and even global warming. One of them tells me he has three bachelors’ degrees and is earning a masters in social work. When he leaves Fort Lewis, he hopes to become a school counselor. Talk about swords into plow shares!

Their only obvious frustration is that many of them want to be in Iraq. Like basketball players watching from the bench as their teammates fight for the NCAA championship, these men long for action.

As much as I admire the other units I visit, the special forces most touch my heart. Their slogan is De Oppresso Liber, Latin for "To free the oppressed." That's a noble cause for which, as a patriot, I am proud to have them fight in my name.

— Mr. Murdock is a columnist with the Scripps Howard News Service.

http://www.nationalreview.com/murdock/murdock052103.asp